

## **Addressing silence, dominance and off-task talk in group work in an academic writing class**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the teacher role in mediating the task and the learner in an advanced academic writing class. Having identified three types of learner (non-) participation– silence, dominance and off-task talk – through reflective viewing and micro-analysis of video data from a class I taught, I asked how these interactional concerns are understood and addressed by other writing teachers in the same language program as I was teaching. Interview findings from eight writing teachers suggest that the teachers play a key mediating role during the various phases of implementing a task-based lesson in order to address the concerns of silence, dominance and off-task talk. For example, in the task design phase, the students can be given specific roles in their group or can be given planning time. In the task performance phase, the teacher can make judicious interventions in order to encourage contributions from the quiet students or put talkative students on hold for a while. The paper concludes with its contributions to and implications for the professional development of language teachers in task-based pedagogy.

### **Keywords**

Group work, task-based pedagogy, professional development, silence, dominance, off-task talk

### **1. Introduction**

A considerable amount of research in task-based instruction has attempted to understand the ways in which tasks, learners and teachers interact in determining a particular kind of learner behavior and learning outcome (Norris, Bygate & Van den Branden, 2009). It is not only the design of tasks, but the unique interactions between tasks, learners and teachers that make up the task-based classroom. For example, learners bring their individual differences to language classrooms--their prior language learning experiences or knowledge, expectations about the learning process, motivations, and personal and social characteristics, to name a few. In addition, different tasks elicit different types and levels of engagement from learners. For example, planning time, level of difficulty, learner familiarity with the

topic and task, and the type of information exchange among the learners play an important role in determining different types of language behaviors from learners.

This study aims to investigate teacher roles in mediating task and learners. To accomplish this, the study takes findings from detailed analysis of small group interactions during collaborative writing and discussion tasks and shows them to eight writing teachers in order to elicit reflection on their own classroom actions on the complex relationships between the significant variables of task-based instruction. These reflections address three different ways of learner (non-)engagement in tasks—silence, dominance and off-task talk. The paper begins with an overview of the teacher role as espoused in task-based pedagogy in general and in using a task as a group work activity in particular. It then provides details on the methodology used in analyzing the interview responses, followed by the findings of this analysis. Finally, the paper concludes with its contributions to and implications for task-based pedagogy.

## **2. The teacher role in a task-based class**

The literature on the role of the teacher in task-based pedagogy (e.g. Samuda, 2001; Van Avermaet et al., 2006) emphasizes the centrality of teacher responsibility in mediating task and learners during the different phases of implementing a task-based lesson, that is: the planning stage, the implementation stage and the performance stage. In this model of pedagogy, teachers scaffold learners to achieve the expected task procedures and their outcomes, monitor learner performance, and offer opportunities for enhanced understanding of language use (Norris, 2009). Van Avermaet et al. (2006) argue that in teaching a task-based lesson, the teacher not only motivates learners into using the target language for meaningful purposes but also interactionally supports them in solving complex problems.

Proponents of task-based teaching and learning argue that most opportunities for language learning occur during learner engagement with pedagogic tasks (Norris, Bygate & Van den Branden, 2009). Pair and group work activities also play a particularly important role in many versions of task-

based teaching. Both social-psychological and socio-cultural theories as well as the research based on them have claimed the benefits of peer support in such group work in second language classrooms (Dornyei, 1997). Van Avermaet et al. (2006) suggest that in order to provide a positive learning experience, teachers can make both planned and unplanned interventions in order to scaffold the learners during different phases of task implementation. Especially in group and pair work contexts, interlocutors may exhibit different dynamics in participation, and the task in process may take a different direction in contrast to the task as planned. In such situations, teachers can make ‘unplanned interventions’ in order to assist the learners in orienting to the task goal (Van Avermaet et al, 2006). Thus, as Norris, Bygate and Van den Branden (2009) argue, the success of a task-based lesson “depends heavily on informed intervention by teachers who not only know their learners, but who also understand when and why to either let a task run its course or to provide additional input and/or feedback to enhance its language learning potential” (p. 244).

Appealing as these suggestions sound, though, concerns can be raised regarding how teachers can identify problems that arise during a task as a group process, and, as a next step, how such problems can be addressed in the different phases of task implementation. Even experienced teachers may find such a role challenging, particularly at times when they are committed to allowing the learners to take charge of their learning. Unwise and frequent teacher intervention into group work can conflict with task-based pedagogy’s premise of learner-centeredness. For example, Brandl’s (2001) findings, based on interview responses from English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, show that many teachers did not know when and how to make interventions when students seemed to be having problems in their group work. These findings allude to a critical need for research that helps us understand different task engagement patterns by students and subsequent teacher roles in bridging learner behaviors and task goals.

### 3. Learner participation in group work

Learners exhibit individual differences in the learning process as well as in task performance. They may show different ways of (non-)participation in group tasks. Here, I focus on three such learner behaviors: silence, dominance and off-task talk. Nakane (2006) notes that silence in interactional contexts can have multiple interpretations; for example, it can be used as a positive politeness strategy when it serves as a sign of solidarity and rapport, but it can also be a negative politeness strategy if it functions as a distancing tactic. Jaworsky and Sachdev (2004) review various interpretations of silence in academic contexts and comment that many previous studies have stereotyped students' silence as indicative of their lack of ability to perform in classrooms. While it may be true, as Breen (2001) shows, that overt participation by learners in classroom interaction may not guarantee greater second language acquisition, it is necessary that learner contributions are visible and substantiated when the tasks are collaborative in nature.

While interpreting and executing tasks, learners may enact different levels of agency and some may dominate others in collaboration. This can create asymmetrical power relations in their interactions. Such relations constructed at a micro-interactional level may be emergent in local interactional contexts depending on the nature of the unfolding discourse, or may be a result of one or more broader factors such as topic expertise, language proficiency or socio-cultural factors like the gender and race of the learners (Vickers, 2010)--or it may be both. While it is both natural and advantageous to work in groups because of the opportunities it offers in learning from peers, dominance by those same peers may be a source of inhibition for others and can, thus, prove counter-productive for learning (Haller et al., 2000). Such domination-subordination can be observed in conversational mechanisms like turn-taking, overlap and talk-time, or through such processes as ratification, failure to ratify, and rejection of ideas and words in completing tasks.

Learners may also exhibit off-task learner behavior where they manifest other goals aside from the learning outcomes targeted in the task (Kilian, Hofer & Kuhnle, 2010). Such a switch from on-task

behavior to off-task activity may not be treated as irrelevant by the students themselves and should not pose a problem if the goal of the task is meaning-focused communication (Markee, 2005). Such talk can also provide an opportunity for a learning experience that is sometimes more meaningful to the learners. However, from a teacher's perspective, frequent off-task student behaviors can be interpreted as counterproductive, particularly when the assigned task includes a list of mini-tasks, predetermined steps, a specified goal and an allocated timeline. Research (e.g. Good & Beckerman, 1978) has shown that time-on-task and times engaged are two dimensions of the instructional process that make significant differences to student learning. Teachers must be aware of all of the different forms of learner participation in group work and play necessary mediating roles in such contexts.

As argued earlier, in order to make an informed decision about teacher actions ensuring learner task performance, including when and how to make interventions in groups, it is necessary to understand the intricate nature of learner participation and group dynamics. Frequent uneven or digressing learner engagements in tasks may lead to an unpleasant learning experience for some group members. Additionally, if only particular learners exhibit such task engagement patterns persistently (e.g. over a semester in an academic context), it can negatively impact their learning outcomes. Moreover, knowledge about and awareness of learner engagement in pedagogic tasks is part of the required professional competence for a task-based teacher.

In the first stage, detailed transcription conventions and fine-grained analysis helped me capture the details of students' silence and dominance in group work tasks and determine the presence of their off-task behavior. In the second stage, viewing selected representative video clips from my writing class and reading their detailed transcripts, eight writing teachers reflected on their own actions and provided suggestions for addressing the interactional concerns under scrutiny. Given the goal of this paper and the limitation of space, this report analyzes the findings from the interviews. What follow are the descriptions of these two stages of data treatment.

1. How do other writing teachers address pedagogical concerns of silence, dominance and off-task talk in implementing group work in their classes?
2. In what ways do these teachers' reflections provide insights in understanding the complex relationship between the task, the learner and the teacher?

#### **4. The participants and the data**

The study took place in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program in the U. S., which offered academic English courses to international students who did not speak English as their native language. The data for identification of pedagogical problems came from analysis of classroom interactions from an advanced academic writing course that I taught in 2009. Though the program was not based on a complete task-based educational framework as envisaged, for example, in Norris (2009), the curriculum, syllabus and classroom teaching for the course were largely based on a series of genre-based tasks (cf. Swales, 1990; Byrne et al., 2006) and included learning endeavors that had “a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who [undertook] the task” (Breen, 1987:23). Students learned academic writing through a series of both individualized and collaborative tasks that would help them analyze and learn writing genres in the academic communities of their respective disciplines.

In order to address the research questions, I selected three video clips that contained representative examples of silence, dominance and off-task behavior of students in group work and presented them with anonymized transcript handouts to eight writing teachers in the same language institute in separate one-on-one interviews. The transcript excerpts with their brief analytical summaries are given in the appendix. The following table provides information about the interviewees' academic level, years of teaching experience and first language.

Table 2: Interview participants' academic, teaching and language backgrounds

Name	Graduate level	Teaching experience	First Language
<b>Kathrin</b>	Ph. D.	3.5 yrs	German
<b>Chin-Sun</b>	Ph. D.	4 yrs	Korean
<b>Taylor</b>	Ph. D.	15 yrs	English
<b>Midori</b>	Ph. D.	5 yrs	Japanese
<b>Wilson</b>	M.A.	10 yrs	English
<b>Kevin</b>	Ph. D.	13 yrs	English
<b>David</b>	M.A.	7 yrs	English
<b>Jean</b>	MA	5 yrs	English

The participants were first asked to comment on the videos, and secondly asked to reflect on their actions regarding how they address the identified interactional concerns in their own classrooms. Some of the interviews with the teachers took the form of what could be considered ‘second stories’ (Sacks, 1992) in conversation analytic literature— narratives that are related to the previous speaker and may contextualize and interpret concerns in order to provide solutions to them. Many teachers shared stories of their professional growth, drawing lessons from their own reflective teaching. As an example, Midori reported, “when I started teaching the writing course, I made students work in groups of four or five. But I have now moved away from that to a lot of small group and pair works this semester. And it’s also with this concerns some people don’t speak up and so leave up to the students.” There is also empirical evidence from Gomez, Walkar and Page (2000) that shows that reflective storytelling is an effective tool for teachers’ professional development. Such talk reinforces the idea that “professional development takes place through professional conversations” (Crookes, 1997: 68).

The rationale behind using video clips and their detailed transcripts deserves some comments. Selected episodes from the classroom in fact helped to sensitize the interviewed teachers to critical

pedagogical concerns in implementing group tasks. Six of the teachers watched the videos more than once and curiously asked me for more details on the task, the learners' ethnicities and academic backgrounds, and so on. Though all of the teachers followed the transcripts while watching the videos, five of them spent a relatively longer time, paying closer scrutiny to the transcripts to see the learners' verbal and embodied actions. Watching videos and reading transcripts thus provided authentic examples of genuine pedagogical concerns (Barraja-Rohan, 2011). Kathrin, for example, reported to me, "when I saw that girl sitting silent next to two other people, this made me think of my own classroom. I do think that it is good to have some video clips as a stimulator." Such a data collection technique arguably is highly effective in prompting teachers to go back to their classrooms and report on their actions from there. The concerns I raised to the teachers did not seem hypothetical, but real.

### **5. Analytical procedures**

Analysis of the interview data was a multi-stage reiterative process and followed both the deductive and inductive methods. Key variables of task-based instruction—the task, the learner and the teacher—served as sensitizing concepts in making sense of the transcription and analysis of the interview data. In addition to these broader thematic categories, I also followed a more multi-layered inductive coding approach as exemplified in the grounded theory by Charmaz (2006). In initial coding, I scrutinized each response from the participants and gave a label to each major incident. In the second stage of focused coding, I grouped similar labels into a more encompassing theme. For example, when I found participants' responses on various reasons behind students' non-engagement in a task—for example, 'English is poor,' 'they came from non-English medium schools,' and 'they are not confident of their English ability' – I grouped them into one broader theme, in this case 'language proficiency.' These focused themes were finally tied back to each major variable of task-based instruction. Similar to previous research in the field (e.g. Carless, 2004), all the initially-coded data touching a theme were pooled together in order to be included under the same theme.



## 6. Findings

I will treat each pedagogical concern separately for the convenience of presentation. However, there is a great deal of overlap between factors within each concern. For example, dominance by some students in a group may be a cause of silence for others or a triggering factor for off-task talk. Or conversely, persistent silence and non-participation by some group members may create conditions for other members for taking most of the task time.

### 6.1 *Silence*

After the teachers watched the video clip where Sachiko was consistently (based on Excerpt 1 in the appendix), I asked them, ‘Have you had similar situations in your class?’ They drew on an array of experiences from their own classroom contexts and reflected on their actions in those contexts. Most participants indicated that they had had situations where one or two students did not participate in or contribute to the task. David, for example, recalled a situation: “I had like one person was working and two people were just sitting there and watching.” Kathrin also reported “I had a student who was totally uninvolved in discussion tasks.”

However, all of the teachers reported that they were mostly aware of the fact that there are different sources of silence, and that the occasional lack of visible interaction is not necessarily an indication of non-participation or non-competence. Wilson notes culture as one important factor contributing to silence: “maybe in their previous universities, group work is not a part of regular classroom business.” Students’ proficiency and confidence in using English is another source that the teachers frequently attributed to silence. David draws on his observations from a writing course for undergraduate students and identifies previous schooling background as one factor: “often-times my students, who speak less, are coming from more or less second language environment and students who often talk more have English medium schooling.” Midori makes a similar observation when she

mentions “I know that everybody has an opinion to say in group, but some of them don’t know how to say it or their English may not be good enough for the purpose.”

These teachers, however, did not regard the students’ pre-existing cultural and language background as the sole source of silence. Their observations show that silence could be emergent in interactional contexts. Wilson, for example, adds that “students may believe that they don’t need to add to what is being discussed because they agree with what other members are saying.” Kevin makes a similar line of observation: “sometimes students think I am not gonna talk because the question is so obvious and I don’t wanna be a person who says the obvious answer. So there will be silence for some obvious questions.” Kathrin comments that when other group members are engaged in interaction, some students simply do find a moment to claim an interactional turn: “There is an interaction established right away between two people and some students feel like they cannot get in even if they have an opinion.”

The success of a particular task does not depend on the students or the interactional contexts alone, but on the nature of task itself. Kevin narrates an experience with this:

What I did was we were doing unreal conditionals yesterday. And what I thought and did was a synopsis of a soap opera. The idea is like if so-and-so had not kissed so-and-so, and so-and-so would not have gotten a divorce. And it was sort of complex soap opera. And it seemed to me that they really did not get with it or were confused with the vocabulary, and instead of doing anything they just sat in silence.

This may mean that unfamiliarity with the topic of the task can lead some students to silence. A similar observation has been reported by Duff (2002) in a Canadian classroom context. She observed that when the teachers used pop-culture texts in student groups, non-mainstream ESL students refrained from taking part in discussions, and silence, though it protected them from humiliation, was a barrier in gaining the cultural capital of their English-speaking peers.

In response to the question, ‘How do you address the issue of silence in your class?’ the participants identified the teacher role as crucial during such moments. They reflected on their own classroom actions, and interestingly enough, recalled actual speech acts they used in their lessons. Wilson, for example, reported that if he notices silence in group work, he asks one of the students to summarize what’s being done: “okay now is your time to talk because you were silent. Tell me about what you contributed to this. What do you think about this?” He remarked that he tries to get the students to directly engage in the task. Kevin also indicated that he makes it clear in the beginning of the class: “you know this is a group project but not a silence meditation.” He adds “I am pretty blunt about asking like okay I have not heard from you today.” Kathrin also indicated that she uses a similar strategy to get silent students involved in group tasks: “So what would be your opinion on that?” The reason is obvious for her in addressing individual students directly, she relates, because she thinks that some students work well when there are elicitations from peers or from a teacher. Kathrin also reports an experience in which putting shy students together sometimes creates a comfort zone for speaking up “I have seen them working with the same people, and they have a sense of feeling like oh we achieved something together. So I don’t really wanna separate them, sometimes.” However, Wilson warns teachers that they have to be careful in putting silent students together as it can lead to unproductiveness:

Where they are like what you wanna do, what you wanna do, like that. In that case you have to give them much more time because they need to warm up to each other or they need to warm up to the task.

In addition to the teacher role during student engagement in tasks, the participants responded that it is also necessary to address the silence issue both in task design and in its implementation. Kevin recalls his experience dealing with task difficulty from a previous class: “And if the task did not work as seen in student silence, like it did not work yesterday, I made the task simpler. I then broke the task into smaller and smaller pieces into sentences so that it becomes so obvious.” David notes that he

includes an individual writing activity before the students get into group work. For him, this gives shy students some time to write something about the task individually so that everyone has something to say about the topic. Jean reports that she sometimes moves from group work to pair work because that encourages the shy students to participate more. Taylor indicates that he socializes his students in specific roles such as note taker, time keeper and reporter so that each student knows exactly what s/he is supposed to be doing. He comments “if some students are silent, it’s the leader’s role to make sure that everybody takes a turn and contributes. When they report to the whole class, they get kinda used to doing quotations and it becomes very clear if someone does not say anything.”

Overall, interview responses suggest that teachers should be critically aware of the nature of the task as well as the characteristics of the learners. In order to encourage the quiet students, teachers can, for example, give planning time to the students for writing notes, assign different roles to them (e.g, time keeper, note taker, etc.), make use of pair work instead of group work, make interventions to elicit responses from quiet students, and linguistically simplify the task.

## **6. 2 Dominance**

After showing video clip 2 (based on Excerpt 2), I asked the teachers, “Have you had situations similar to this in your class?” Many teachers reported that it is not unusual to have some talkative students who take most of the task time and assume dominant roles in collaborative tasks. Kathrin recalls a case from a class she had taught during a previous semester: “At the beginning of the semester I had two very talkative students, and they were sitting in opposite sides of the classroom and they had a lot to speak all the time.” Wilson also remarks “it is natural to have some dominating students in our class. In a sense everybody is a high output generator at one time or the other.”

Sources of dominance varied. Wilson comments “I am not surprised if some students are more talkative or dominant than others. That’s how they do the things, and they may not be aware of this.” In Midori’s and David’s experience, students who have spent some time in English-speaking countries

or have their education in English-medium schools tend to have both higher proficiency and more to share in group talk. They report that immigrant students or students from English-speaking parts of the world usually dominate students coming from countries where English has a limited use. Kathrin and Chin-Sun indicated that the topic of the task itself can privilege some students and exclude others.

The teachers reported that they use various strategies in creating opportunities for their students to elicit relatively equal contribution to tasks. Wilson, for example, notes that it is rude to say “stop now, you’re done with your part.” Instead, he reports how he takes care of the dominant students: “Okay that’s a great point, hold on a second and let me ask someone else, and get back to you later.” Jean also reports a dilemma in such situations: “I don’t want to discourage students, but as a teacher I should try to encourage for more even participation.” Midori also had a similar strategy to balance contributions from different types of learners. She comments, “When I see a student talking a lot, I would say something that would go against his or her opinion and then ask the other students which opinion they would agree or disagree with.” Kevin considers the different characteristics of the students and recognizes that sometimes it is useful to give roles that fit students’ learning styles: “Let’s say if students are writing in a group, one student gets a typist role. And you can give a role to the most talkative person, like you are the reporter.” Taylor reports that student dominance can sometimes be predicted if the teacher knows his/her students well, and that the teacher can address it during different phases of a lesson:

I had one student that used to talk and dominate other group members a lot. In particular, when the reporter would report, you know, I said I keep hearing this person’s comment all the time in your report but I don’t hear as much as equal amount of comments from other students. Why is that? I just asked a question.

These teachers have found a number of classroom management techniques effective in addressing the issue of group dominance. Kathrin, for example, recalls a case when she paired up two

dominant students together: “Eventually what I did was I paired him [a very talkative student] with another very talkative student and then they worked together. I saw that they enjoyed working with each other.” Kevin and Wilson, however, see pitfalls in grouping dominant and silent students in separate groups because they may not have the opportunity to socialize with all the students in the class. In addition, as mentioned in the previous section, Wilson’s experience shows that silent students may sometimes spend most of their task time in silence with very little outcome, and may also lose opportunities to learn from more expert peers. David recognizes that teachers should be able to arrange students in groups in such a way that they acknowledge each student’s strengths. He reflects on his classroom actions in this way: “I’ll tell them okay you get to work together, you’ve got a lot of good ideas. And she is really good using academic level vocabulary and structure and make sure that you’ll get a lot of her ideas on that. Where that is true and when that is obvious I try to do that, but sometimes I fear that I might be alienating some students.” Kevin also describes a similar experience mixing different types of students: “I try to mix the classroom dynamics as much as possible so that you know most people have an opportunity to work with most of the other people in the class.”

Most teacher actions that address the issue of dominance, as Kathrin also acknowledges, take place after the teacher’s observation of student interactions. For that reason, some teachers recognized that teachers can try to address the issue in the task planning phase. Some of these ideas have been already discussed in the preceding section. Kathrin, Chin-Sun, Midori and David comments that they give some preparation time to the students before they jump into group work. Kathrin reflects, “They had something written down to share so that they could make contributions more equal.” Taylor mentioned that he found different student roles helpful to address the issue of dominance in the task design phase. He notes: “I think it is also possible to assign specific roles to specific students when you write the activity, for example in the handout or activity sheet.” Taylor and David both recognize the value of awareness-raising tasks as well. Taylor comments: “Using videos like the ones you showed is

an excellent idea because sometimes students don't realize that they are doing it. And when they see themselves in the video, then they can say oh my God, I did not realize I was talking that much."

David reports a similar experience:

I used to have a video of Cambridge task; it was like about 2 minutes for the task.

And one student was dominating the other student. I asked them like how they would rate them. Everyone said that they did not like the student talk too much.

And I asked what advice would you give to the one who talks too much or the one who talked too little? So I recommend this to others.

In sum, the teachers' responses show that the teacher's role is crucial during different phases of designing and implementing tasks. Teachers can make an attempt to deliberately address possible asymmetrical power dynamics in group work by designating specific roles to the students in the task itself or while arranging the students in groups. They can also keep an eye on student activities and take strategic actions to balance student contributions to the task in situ as Jean's comments reflect: "Try to let the student do the task independently as much as possible but intervene when it is necessary." Teachers can also put some talkative students on hold when contributions are sought from students that show minimal participation.

### **6. 3 *Off-task talk***

In order to investigate how teachers interpret and deal with off-task issues in their writing classes, I first showed the teachers video clip 3 (based on Excerpt 3). Then I asked them, "Have you had similar situations in your class? If you have, how did you deal with them?" All of the teachers found the topic of off-task talk relatively more challenging to make specific comments on. David

comments that one of the reasons the English program exists is that “it’s the place where students can do this kind of stuff and feel comfortable. And this is like exchanging information about their life that they might not know.” Wilson mentions “It’s tough not to expect off-topic talk because school is social, it’s not a machine and you can’t get your students to do like a machine.” It was also noted by many participants that there are sometimes no clear-cut boundaries between on-task talk and off-task talk.

The participants identified different sources of such off-task talk. Wilson mentioned that different tasks elicit different emotional responses from different people. On a similar note, Kathrin recognizes that the nature of the task itself may elicit responses that may or may not be directly related to what may be considered on-task. Commenting on the more open-ended nature of tasks she uses in her class, she adds “I think that a lot of discussion questions ask about what is your experience with bla bla bla? And they have personal experiences to share. And there is somebody asking ‘how did it really happen to you,’ and then it may start taking a different direction. I see there is no clear line and it’s in the large realm of the topic they are discussing.” Wilson notes task difficulty as another possible reason: “sometimes they find the task too difficult and the students avoid the intellectual and choose the social.” Commenting on the video clip, Wilson claimed that the nature of the existing relationship between the participants may be a potential source of off-task talk. For example, he responded, “If you have two students who are from the same dorm, see each other all the time, go to the same club, then they are able to communicate on multiple levels. And then they may not even realize that they are talking about some unrelated things. And as a teacher you have to be able to read the class very carefully.”

In response to ‘How would you address the issue of off-task talk in student groups in your class?’, many of the participants reported that they were okay if the talk goes on for one or two minutes. However, they indicated that frequent switches from on-task to off-task talk will have negative effects for achieving the learning outcomes. All of the participants commented that teachers need to take cautious steps in handling this issue. For example, Kevin recalls “I don’t interrupt immediately. I feel



it's kinna rude. And then I indicate, okay that's great, but how about this reading?" Wilson also reflects on his actions and comments that teachers have to play an important role by saying, for example, "What's going on? What do you guys think about this? Maybe you guys have to go back to the text and maybe think... um. Why don't you look here?" This, as Wilson says, helps him bring his students back to the task. Taylor shares a similar response: "Only if it seems to me that they are going in a very unproductive way, then I go to them and say, 'guys are working, you guys are having fun but too much fun. In this way, I kinna move around the class.'" Kathrin also has a similar experience: "I normally don't try to be very confrontational, but I just try to say okay you have only accomplished one question so far so what are the other results you have. You have to finish them first."

Some teachers indicated that though off-topicness is an emergent phenomenon in interaction during task completion, it is possible that this can be addressed to some extent in task design and implementation. Midori and David emphasized that students should be clear about the learning goals from a particular task and that the teacher should also make his/her expectations explicit for the students. Midori reflects on her experience, saying, "I give them more specific tasks so that they can focus on the task because if the question is very abstract it's difficult for them to keep the discussion sometimes. Just give them specific tasks to complete so that they know what they have to do." She reiterated that giving specific guidelines can help teachers get rid of student digression from the task focus. Jean provides an example of how specific guidelines can be given to the students: "We just don't have to say-- do a peer review, we can be specific. For example, look at the introduction. Does the writer state his/her opinions? Underline the opinion." Kevin, as discussed earlier, indicated that he simplified a presumably difficult task for the students. He also notes that because the difficulty level experienced by different learners can vary, it is not unusual to find some group members finishing the task faster than others. Jean also reports a similar experience: "some students finish tasks before others. Sometimes I go around groups and ask additional questions." Similar to the comments for silence and dominance, David emphasized the role of awareness-raising tasks regarding off-task talk and its

usefulness and pitfalls. For him, this could be done by showing videos of actual classroom situations or explicitly discussing the issue with the students. In addition to that, David recognizes the importance of preparation time in keeping the students on task. He mentions, “I think one way is to give prep time individually first so they have something to bring in so that when they get to the interactional stage, they have more time and thing to contribute on the topic.” Taylor and David emphasize that giving specific roles in the task itself would help students remain on task. In particular, if a teacher knows the performance behavior of the students, s/he can designate specific roles to the students in the group. Taylor and Wilson also reported one additional way to implement tasks: they first did the writing tasks by themselves before they implemented them with the students. Wilson explained:

Each time I give them a task, I want to engage myself like how much time it should take, its difficulty level like that. And also who is this task for, does it really work? When am I going to put it in class? Am I going to use it in the beginning or end? After I analyzed all of that then I think okay I am going to pair them up or put them in groups. I’m not going to give my students a blind task.

In sum, while the teachers acknowledged that they did not necessarily discourage off-task talk in student groups, they recognized that teachers have to play an efficient monitoring role in order to help students achieve task goals. Teachers should develop their sensitivity to the potential outcomes that result from individual differences in learners or differential learner reactions to the task. In order to make the students aware of this, the teachers can, for example, use awareness-raising tasks before a task is introduced. In the case of contexts where some students finish the task earlier than others, the teacher has to play an efficient role in introducing some smaller tasks in order to check students’ off-task behavior. A similar suggestion has also been offered by Markee (2005).

## **7. Discussion and Conclusion**

These findings must be interpreted in view of the broader framework of task-based pedagogy, particularly in terms of its key variables, the task, the learner and the teacher. Different types of tasks

and topics have the potential to elicit different engagement dynamics from the learners. For example, tasks that have clear goals and guidelines and draw from topics that are familiar to learners are likely to solicit relatively even participation from the learners. Learners also exhibit individual differences in the learning process depending on their motivation level and personality, as can be seen, for example, in their willingness to participate, in their learning styles and strategies, and in their attitude toward a particular activity. Teachers must play a pivotal role in order to bridge the task-as-a-workplan and the task-as-a-process. The findings show similarities to Van Avermaet et al.'s (2006) suggestion that teachers have to make both planned and unplanned interventions to maximize learning opportunities during different stages of implementing task-based pedagogy. The findings also show some similarities to Lynch's (1997) observation of teacher intervention during communication breakdowns in learner-centered group work in three adult English as a Foreign Language classes. Based on his analysis of classroom discourse, Lynch warns language teachers against stepping in as soon as learners encounter communication problems in group work and suggests that they raise learners' awareness of the tactical choices open to them in handling their problems by themselves; inappropriate or early intervention may frustrate real communication and learning in the classroom.

Findings from the current study also showed tension between the teachers' commitment to allowing students to work in groups on their own on the one hand and the teachers' role in making interventions to direct the learners toward the task goal on the other. The teachers reported that they were hesitant to make immediate and frequent interventions, but would first make observations and make strategic moves to invite contributions from silent students, monitoring dominating students and bringing off-task students on task. Inherent in these findings, however, is the fact that although there are ways to address learner interactional concerns in both task design and implementation phases, it is neither necessary nor possible to fully restrict the students in choosing their preferred methods of task engagement. This is similar to observations made by researchers working from interactional perspectives (e.g. Mori, 2002; Seedhouse, 2005).

Insights from the findings of this study can be used by both novice and experienced teachers in teaching similar courses. Literature both on apprenticing teaching assistants as well as socializing teachers who have moved from one teaching context to another (e.g. Byrnes, 2005, *inter alia*) discusses a need to adopt and adapt teaching practices appropriate to the situation. The teachers who volunteered to participate in this research had formal training in pedagogy, and most had passed through years of teaching experience in various settings. As Garton and Richards (2008) claim, closer scrutiny of teacher discourses is still a new research terrain, and the importance of analyzing them is self-evident. Such discourses about classroom practice shape the beliefs and ideas of those who are just starting out.

In conclusion, while silence, dominance and off-task talk are natural interactional dynamics observed in second language classrooms, teachers need an increased awareness of learners' individual differences and the different responses that a particular task can generate. While there may be notable differences between what teachers report they do and what they actually do, reflections on their own actions can provide teachers with valuable insights on task design, classroom management, and differential learner contributions to task performance.

(Total number of words: 6,779— excluding abstract, appendix and references)

## **Appendix: Tasks, transcript excerpts and analytical summaries**

### **Video clip 1**

Task 1: Paraphrasing: Students first discussed different ways of avoiding plagiarism, e.g. citation, paraphrasing and summary. They were then given a text excerpt from their course textbook and an instruction: *Paraphrase the given text without distorting its original meaning.* In this group, Hasan, Amor and Sachiko were paraphrasing the text. Sachiko was silent throughout. Words/sentences in bold face indicate the parts meant for inscription in the written text.

Excerpt 1: Paraphrasing task- Sachiko silent

```

1      Amor:  ((typing in a laptop))
2      Hasan: uncritical discussion (.) or summary but
3              also(.)a (.) <highly evaluative genre>
4      »Sachiko: ((looks at Hasan))
5      Amor: °uh[m::° ((removes gaze from laptop and looks at Hasan))
6      Hasan:  [which play an important part(.) for the academia.
7      Amor:   or: you could say (.) one type of a highly evaluative
8              genre (.) is a book review which is being utilized by
9      »Sachiko ((looks at Amor))
10     Hasan:  um actually (.) they are not defining the book review
11     Amor:   ↑oh ((raises head toward HA))
12     Hasan:  They are just telling about the (.) wh- what
13             is the importance (.) and how was it earlier.
14             ((showing text in the handout))
15     »Sachiko: ((continues looking at Hasan speaking))
16     Amor:   um:: :okay ((looks at Hasan and nods))
17     Hasan:  So in order to define it, there is a field of-
18             that mentions it (.) you see that earlier it was based
19             on uncritical discussion and summaries, nowadays
20             (.)highly evaluative genre ( ).
21     »Sachiko ((moves close to the computer screen))
22     Amor:   uhm ((types))book reviews not only play important part
23     Hasan:  Yeah. Starting nowadays ((points to the screen))
24     Amor:   Okay!. Starting nowadays ((types))
25     Hasan:  It is not only an uncritical discussion or summary
26     Amor:   ((types))
27     »Sachiko: ((Keeps looking at the computer screen and
                turns gaze to whoever is speaking; when disagreements
                emerge, Hasan and Amor negotiate the more appropriate
                wording/form for writing. The collaborative writing
                activity takes about 15 minutes to complete))

```

Analytical summary: Hasan, Amor and Sachiko are working in a group in order to collaboratively paraphrase the text. Hasan and Amor negotiate when disagreements emerge (lines 2-16). Sachiko turns her gaze toward the immediate speaker as can be seen in lines 4, 9, and 15, or fixes her gaze on the computer screen as in line 21. She is not visibly contributing for the collaborative task, nor does she

claim the floor for speaking. The task completes without Sachiko's verbal contribution. I observed this kind of participation pattern from Sachiko throughout the semester.

## Video clip 2

Task 2: E-mail writing: The students had been given this instruction: *Write an email to the ESL institute Director asking for a leave of absence for one week. Reason: you are going home for your sister's wedding. Ask politely for a reply.* Before they inscribed the text, they decided to discuss the possible email text orally. There are five members in the group: Hasan, Rohan, Amor, Sachiko and Hu.

### Excerpt 2: Email writing- Rohan and Hasan engage in off-task talk

```

1  Amor:   We need to choose the- the date=
2  Rohan: =After the class I need to go to the Sinclair library
3          ((addressing it to Hasan who was sitting next to Amor)).
4          (0.2)
5  Rohan:  Do you know where is it? Because I need to hire some movies.
6  Hasan:  Okay. ((looking at Rohan))
7  Rohan:  I want to see some movie this week ((looking at Hasan))
8  Hasan:  Okay ((looking at Rohan))
9  Amor:   Hehehehehehehe
10 Hasan:  ((addressing gaze to Amor))You know you can hire a lot of
11          movies from [Sinclair library?
12 Rohan:   [Sinclair library.
13 Amor:   Oh really? ((addressing gaze to Hasan))
14 Hasan:  Oh yeah. And I asked that how many movies I can borrow?
15 Rohan:  More than fifty thousand I think.
16 Amor:  ((smiles looking at Rohan))
17 Hasan:  He said as many as you can ((addressing Amor)) (0.2) and you
18          need to return all of them in three or four days.
19 Rohan:  The authority suspects that the people go with large bag
20          with full of movies and go away.
21 Hasan:  But you have no way. You have to return within four days.
22 Rohan:  Yeah yeah
23 Hasan:  So you cannot take more than some. You cannot take thirteen.
          (off-task talk continues for 3 minutes and 35 seconds until
          Rohan brings the topic back to the task assigned)

```

Analytical summary: While Amor continues to provide text for the email, Rohan introduces off-task talk in line 2, which lasts for about three and half minutes. Rohan also informs the group of his plan to watch a movie (line 7). We do not see verbal participation by Hu and Sachiko in this talk. Amor has very minimal participation (e.g. in lines 7 and 13). This talk is mostly a collaborative construction by Hasan and Rohan, and this becomes a source of exclusion for the other team members. It was quite normal to have such off-task talk in group work. What was not natural for me as a teacher, however, was the frequency of such talk initiated by Rohan throughout the semester.

### Video clip 3

Task 3: Data commentary: Students had been given a statistics table published by the Institute of International Education- Open Doors. The instructions read: *Read the statistics of international students who entered the United States in the year 2008 and write a short data commentary based on the guidelines in the handout.* The handout guidelines required the students to highlight only statistically significant information in the data. Words/sentences in bold face indicate the parts meant for inscription in the written text.

#### Excerpt 3: Data commentary- Dominance

1 Amor: **The table (.) indicates**  
 2 Rohan: um um  
 3 Amor: **the table indicates the**  
 4 Rohan: ((to Amor)) I think **indicates** is more specific.  
 5 I think it should be **the table shows** or like that.  
 6 Amor: Oh okay. I agree.  
 7 Rohan: That's my opinion.  
 8 Amor: It's okay. It's okay. You are an expert.  
 9 Rohan: No no. I'm not expert.  
 10 Amor: **The table shows that**((dictates to Jing))  
 11 Rohan: ((Leaning toward Amor)) How old are you?  
 12 Amor: Me? 30.  
 13 Rohan: Oh, I am junior. I'm 27.  
 14 Amor: You? ((pointing toward Jing))  
 15 Jing: Seventeen? ((addressing Rohan))  
 16 Rohan: No no. I'm 27.  
 17 Amor: And you?  
 18 Jing: Oh, I'm 24.  
 19 Rohan: So I'll admire whatever you say((stretching both hands))  
 20 (0.2)  
 21 Rohan: I agree with you.  
 22 Jing: **Okay the table shows that** ((resumes typing))  
 23 Amor: **The table shows that** ((writing on a piece of paper))  
 24 Rohan: **The table shows that (.)** um the ((looking at the handout))  
 25 (0.2) **the origin of students from different countries**  
 26 Amor: Yeah  
 27 Rohan: **The origin of con- the place of origin**  
 28 Amor: Yeah **the place of origin**  
 29 Rohan: **The place of origin of different countries**  
 30 Amor: I think **of different students (.)** um (.) in the year 2009  
 31 Jing: ((writes))  
 32 Rohan: ((closely inspecting Jing's computer screen)) No, it's not like  
 33 that. It should be **the table shows that from different (.)** but  
 34 not **of different students**((addressing Amor))  
 35 Jing: ((Exchanging smile with Amor, Jing hands laptop over to Rohan.  
 36 Rohan quickly grabs the laptop and starts typing))  
 37 Rohan: ((Addressing Amor)) **Place of origin of different students.**  
 38 ((Rohan and Jing exchange smile again, Rohan keeps typing))  
 39 Amor: ((To Rohan))Are you into your Ph D?  
 40 Rohan: No, I am in my MA first year.



Analytical summary: As Excerpt 3 shows, Jing is typing the data commentary while Amor and Rohan are providing the text input. The verb 'indicates' proposed by Amor (lines 1, 3) is promptly rejected and is replaced with 'indicates' by Rohan in line 5. Amor concedes to Rohan (line 6) and uptakes the word proposed by Rohan (line 10). Rohan again rejects another of Amor's proposals (line 29) in lines 32-34, and ratifies his own, replacing 'of different' with 'from different'. Furthermore, Rohan takes over the responsibility of the composer in line 36, taking the laptop from Jing. Amor and Jing possibly find this strange: they exchange a smile. Amor also questions the legitimacy of Rohan's expertise (line 38).

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